

Evangelical Christians respond to global AIDS crisis

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — Faced with an AIDS epidemic in Africa, evangelical Christians in Minnesota and across the United States are begin-

Many pastors say they've flunked the 'divine test' that is the AIDS epidemic, but they're coming off the sidelines to throw their church's considerable weight and funds into caring for African AIDS victims.

ning to seriously ask the question: What would Jesus do? One thing they're doing is

joining forces with AIDS activists who have been spotlighting the problem for years, along

with gays, liberals, feminists, Hollywood celebrities and rock stars such as Bono.

Which is why U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum, describing herself as a "progressive Democrat from St. Paul," found herself — for the first time in her life — addressing a conference of evangelical leaders Thursday in Washington, D.C.

Speaking at the same forum was Sen. Rick Santorum, the Pennsylvania Republican who recently stirred up a nationwide controversy by questioning the legal grounds for laws protecting homosexuality.

"Evangelical Christians, along with a lot of other people, care very deeply about this disease of mass destruction we call AIDS," McCollum said in an interview. "When people are dying, when children are being left orphaned, our com-



Rep. Betty McCollum said, "When people are dying . . . our common humanity overcomes a lot of day-to-day differences."



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While the abstinence-vs.-condoms clash rages on, the two sides say they can agree about one thing: When it comes to AIDS, Christian mercy needs to replace moral judgment about how the disease is transmitted.

For the Rev. Rick Warren,

senior pastor at Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, Calif. — one of the largest megachurches in the nation — the "burning bush" was the realization that there are now 14 million children orphaned by AIDS in Africa.

"Two years ago, AIDS was not on my agenda," Warren said. "It was not on my radar. . . . [Then] God said, 'You must care about this issue, because I care about it.'"

McCollum, echoing the sentiments of many of the evangelical leaders, described the global AIDS crisis as a "divine test" for Christians. Until now, it's a test many pastors concede they have flunked.

"The response of the Christian church has been appalling," said the Rev. John Crosby, senior pastor at Christ Presbyterian Church in Edina. Crosby has taken his own family on a trip to Kenya to care for AIDS victims.

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Evangelizing

The recent turnaround has come about with the help of some old-fashioned evangelizing, and \$15 billion budgeted by Congress and approved by President Bush last month to deal with the African AIDS crisis.

The evangelizing is being done by World Vision, the world's largest Christian humanitarian organization, which is conducting a 15-city tour for evangelical leaders, including a recent stop in the Twin Cities.

Rich Stearns, president of World Vision, calls AIDS "the greatest humanitarian crisis of all time" but complains that evangelists have stayed on the sidelines because of "the stigma attached to transmission issues."

A recent study commissioned by World Vision found that only 7 percent of evangelical Christians were willing to give money to help AIDS victims in Africa.

But visions of orphaned children, coupled with the fact that much of the African AIDS epidemic is the result of prostitution and sexual violence against women, has changed attitudes.

So has the Bush administration's emphasis on faith-based charities, which has opened up federal funding to church groups that want to treat AIDS victims and preach abstinence.

Uganda's programs

Many evangelists look for inspiration in Uganda, where abstinence programs promoted by President Yoweri Museveni were credited with lowering HIV infection rates before the widespread distribution of condoms in recent years.

Among those endorsing Museveni's approach is David Wakudumira, the mayor of the Nile River city of Jinja, Uganda's second-largest. Wakudumira, who is scheduled to be in the Twin Cities today to enlist U.S. support in the fight against AIDS, said there's room for both approaches: condoms and abstinence.

With the promise of \$15 billion yet to be allocated by Congress, the 260 evangelicals meeting in Washington this week also are lobbying White House and congressional leaders.

Organized by World Vision, they're pressing for appropriations that will unleash the latent power of churches, which they say already exists in almost every sub-Saharan village.

"Maybe on this issue history could be made," said British evangelist Clive Calver, president of World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals. "Maybe we can all withdraw from our individual labels and serve the body of Christ together."

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